

On CT H.B. No. 5029:

My name is Catherine Chiocchi, and I'm a Connecticut native and a junior at Yale College. At Yale, I work as a Communication and Consent Educator, or CCE. The CCEs are a group of about forty undergraduates that hail from all different parts of campus life. We work to promote a positive sexual culture on campus and serve as peer educators about Yale's sexual misconduct policies and procedures.

Yesterday, five of my peers and I attended a roundtable discussion at Southern Connecticut State University with Senator Blumenthal and Congresswoman DeLauro to offer suggestions about what the federal government can do to best institutionalize sexual violence prevention and compliance with federal law regarding. Like far too many discussions about sexual assault, the talk began with a list of harrowing statistics. One in five college-aged women will experience sexual assault during her time in college. One in twelve college-aged men. Words like "epidemic" and "crisis" were used. And make no mistake, sexual misconduct of any kind is a crime that should not be tolerated on college campuses or anywhere in our community. We are here today because we all agree that sexual misconduct is a serious issue, and many troublesome behaviors have become normalized in our society.

But starting conversations with scary statistics does not lead to productive conversations. Sexual violence education programming on college campuses should not focus on scaring freshmen but on building shared campus values of communication and respect.

At Yale, the CCEs run workshops with the entire freshmen and sophomore classes. The freshman workshop focuses on preventing sexual pressure. The sophomore workshop teaches bystander intervention techniques. We don't use any statistics in our workshops. Instead, we focus on ideal sexual encounters—ones where both people are mutually enthusiastic and feel comfortable expressing what they do and do not want. We don't focus what consent is and how to get it. After all, that's a bare legal minimum. We strive for something much higher than that. We don't try to think of situations as either consensual or not, but rather whether they were ideal or not. By creating a campus culture where we strive to have every sexual encounter be an ideal one, troublesome dynamics stick out more and perpetrators can be more easily identified.

The CCEs have been around three years, and I can already see the impact our approach is taking. Conversations around campus about sexual assault have taken on a more considered tone. People feel empowered to speak out at parties if they notice troublesome dynamics playing out. By fostering the shared values of communication and respect, we're making tangible changes to our campus culture. We don't think working with ideals is foolish. We are the students that make up our college; we have the power to change it.

When considering legislation about campus sexual assault, it's pivotal that education programming does not use scare tactics to intimidate underclassmen. That doesn't lead to real change. Instead, we need to focus on building shared community values that every student can rally around.